

## Metaphors in Personal Narratives about Tinnitus: A Case Study of the American Tinnitus Association

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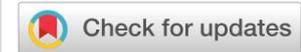
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### ABSTRACT

*This study explores the metaphors utilized to describe the lived experience of tinnitus in internet personal narratives. The study aims to identify the types of metaphors used by tinnitus sufferers to describe their experience and to analyse the conceptual frames underpinning these metaphors. Data were collected from publicly available online personal narratives on American Tinnitus Association Website and analyzed qualitatively. The findings reveal a range of metaphor types, including inhabitant metaphors, war metaphors, journey metaphors, and loss/robbery metaphors. Notably, tinnitus is often conceptualized as an unwanted inhabitant, a stubborn intruder, or even as a predatory creature, reflecting its persistent and invasive nature. While based on a limited sample, this study provides valuable insights into the range of metaphorical expressions used by tinnitus sufferers and makes a meaningful contribution to understanding the role of metaphor in constructing and communicating subjective experiences of chronic health condition.*

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### 1. Introduction

Metaphors are the primary cognitive system that people use to comprehend and reason about abstract, complex ideas or experiences. By transferring abstract and complex (target domain) notion onto another that is based on their own basic knowledge and experience of more concrete things (source domain), metaphors allow people to make abstract, complex experiences more comprehensible and easier to communicate (Kovecses, 2008; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 2003; Fairuz et al., 2022; Tammasse et al., 2025). Hence, metaphors not only function as stylistic devices, but also cognitive mechanism governing how people think and communicating ideas. For example, people often talk about illness in terms of war, ‘I have kind of prepared myself for a battle with cancer’ (Demmen et al., 2015, p. 207). Additionally, metaphors also have framing functions in that they highlight certain aspects of something while de-emphasizing others (Charteris-Black, 2005; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Rahman & Weda, 2018). This suggests that metaphors show how people think about a topic and what aspects they regard as important. Therefore, metaphorical expressions are considered as a means to see people’s way of perceiving the world including their complex experiences.

People with illnesses, especially chronic and invisible ones, often find it difficult to express their experiences. It is hardly surprising as illness has strong effects on people emotionally, psychologically, and socially (Semino et al., 2018; Prihandoko et al., 2021; Junaid & Andini, 2025), making it challenging to communicate and comprehend. This challenge is particularly observable in the ubiquity of metaphors in their narratives of illness. Violence metaphors, for example, are frequently employed to communicate lived experiences of cancer patients, highlighting the struggle of cancer patients against their illness.

Another very subjective health condition that has some similar consequences is Tinnitus. Tinnitus is the term for a “conscious perception of an auditory sensation in the absence of a corresponding external stimulus”. Tinnitus is not an illness, but it is a common medical symptom that can be impairing (Baguley et al., 2013). What patients of tinnitus have reported, similar to other chronic disease patients like cancer, are sleep problems, concentration difficulties, anxiety, depression (even suicide), stress (Andersson, 2002; Tyler & Baker, 1983) and decreased overall life quality. These consequences, closely related to aspects of self-determination theories, such as needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2008), affects their well-beings. However, Tinnitus—different from cancer—is not malignant. Another distinction is that those who have tinnitus appear to be in perfect health with no symptoms of disease, and their

experiences are inaudible to others. Because of this, tinnitus patients find it difficult to explain their "enigmatic" health condition to others and to themselves.

While metaphors have been shown to help patients structure, comprehend, communicate, and symbolically manage their illness, tinnitus metaphors remain a relatively underexplored area within illness discourse. Moreover, previous studies have demonstrated that metaphor research can offer valuable insights into how the general public perceives and understands illness. To date, however, no systematic linguistic investigation has been conducted to address this gap by examining metaphors in the personal narratives of individuals living with tinnitus.

This research, therefore, aims to document linguistic metaphors to examine how individuals with tinnitus use metaphors in their written, online personal narratives in order to better understand how they use them to communicate and make sense of their conditions

### 1.1 Metaphor and Illness

The studies of illness discourse have long been flourishing since the publication of Sontag's seminal work, *Illness as Metaphor* (Sontag, 1978). Through her research, she claims that metaphor of illness. Some of those studies have explored metaphors in diseases such as cancer (Gibbs & Franks, 2002; Semino et al., 2018), schizophrenia-spectrum disorder (Demjén et al., 2019), dementia (Castaño, 2020), and Covid-19 (Guliashvili, 2023; Semino, 2021). Among these studies, some are carried out on the use of metaphor in different domains of communication, such as news (Cotter et al., 2021; Guliashvili, 2023), and "lived-experience" narratives (Castaño, 2020; Semino et al., 2018). Investigating illness metaphors in news particularly concerns how certain illnesses are conceptualized and framed. Guliashvili (2023) examined metaphors in news discourses about Covid-19 pandemic around the world using Conceptual Metaphor Framework, especially the framing effect of source domain. The corpus-based study found that the change from *war* source domain to other source domain shifts the framing of Covid-19 in media, reflecting change on the way news conceptualizes the virus.

On the other hand, research on metaphors of illness in lived-experience narratives focuses on the way the writer, in this case the patient, think about and communicate their subjective experience with the illness. Castaño (2020) investigated blogposts of dementia patients in their early onset using CMT and discourse analysis approach. She found that patients use personification, journey, and war metaphor to talk about their illness in their blogposts. This is in line with the function of metaphor as cognitive device to talk and think about subjective experiences in terms of a more concrete domain (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Employing a different methodology, Semino et al., (2018) did an extensive corpus-based research on cancer and end-of-life metaphors. The 1.5 million words corpus includes interviews and online forum posts authored by patients, family carers, and healthcare professionals in UK. This research reveals that violence and journey metaphors are the dominant frames. Violence metaphors are more prevalent among healthcare professionals than among patients and carers. On the other hand, journey metaphors are more pervasive among patients and carers. This indicates patients and carers communicate a more affirmative narrative. This study also showed that metaphorical framing is highly context-dependent, therefore it is crucial to investigate other narrative by other parties, including patients of other illnesses to enrich the literature on metaphor and health communication.

In the context of tinnitus discourse, very limited metaphor-focused research has been conducted. Glotova & Johansson Falck (2022) examine 19th-century medical records of tinnitus from the UK and US and identify a wide range of lexico-encyclopedic conceptual metaphors, where people use the sounds from *nature*, *machinery*, *transport*, *domestic interiors*, and even *music* to talk about tinnitus. Through their findings, they the metaphors link patients' subjective experiences to familiar environmental sounds, hence they are also utilized as a reasoning tool.

This study aims to qualitatively metaphors to conceptualize and communicate the "lived experience" of tinnitus patients in terms of their perception of tinnitus itself, their emotional well-being, and life.

## 2. Methodology

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to metaphorical expressions found in a corpus of 10 personal narratives stories of tinnitus patients posted on the American Tinnitus Association (ATA) Website (<https://www.ata.org/>). ATA is a non-profit organization focusing on finding cures for tinnitus and improving patient care and support. Samples of personal narratives of tinnitus patients were taken based on linguistic and content factors. Only personal narratives written in English and using first-person pronoun were included.

The corpus consists of 10,797 words in total. The data of this research was in the form of the words and phrases that were used metaphorically in the texts.

Metaphorically used expressions and linguistics metaphors are the surface manifestation of Conceptual Metaphor (Kovecses, 2010). Since the size of the data is too small for Conceptual Metaphor Identification, the focus of this study is to identify and explicate the metaphorical expressions used by tinnitus patients in their personal narrative posts. Metaphorical expressions from the corpus were identified using a modified version of Metaphor Identification Procedure (henceforth MIP) (Pragglejaz Group, 2007; Steen et al., 2010). In this procedure metaphorical expressions are identified using the following steps.

1. Read the entire text to obtain a general understanding of the meaning.

2. Determine the lexical units.

3. For each lexical unit, determine whether it has a more basic, physical, concrete meaning in other contexts with the assistance of dictionary. Attending to Steen et al., (2010) corpus-based dictionaries such Longman dictionary is used in this step.

4. If such contrast exists, and the contextual meaning can be understood in comparison with the basic meaning, the unit is marked as metaphorical.

The identified metaphorical expressions were further categorized into topics that reflected recurring themes in the narratives. This categorization was conducted through an iterative process after MIP; they were grouped based on shared semantic and conceptual features. Expressions referring to similar conceptualizations of tinnitus (e.g., as an intruder, a burden, or a companion) were clustered together to form broader thematic categories to discuss.

### 3. Result and Discussion

#### 3.1 Metaphors in Tinnitus

Several metaphorically used words and expressions were identified across the tinnitus personal narratives. These metaphors reflect the complex ways in which individuals conceptualize their experience with tinnitus.

**Table 1. Results of metaphor analysis**

Metaphor groups	Examples
Inhabitant	" I have to learn to <i>live</i> with it (tinnitus)"
Journey	" It's an <i>ongoing</i> journey."
Robber	"...that tinnitus had <i>robbed</i> me of my life.
War	"Due to my <i>battle</i> with tinnitus,..."
Force	"I couldn't <i>control</i> my tinnitus"
Living Creature	"Prior to the <i>shutdown</i> , I had foolishly gone to a movie..."

#### a. Inhabitant metaphors

In our data, it was quite common for writer to describe tinnitus as an entity that comes and stay in their life without invitation. One of them wrote:

##### Data 1

"Has this *whisper* always been *here*? that *whisper* hadn't always *been* there. that *whisper* would never *leave*."

The word *whisper* in Data 1 is used to substitute tinnitus. In the expression above, tinnitus was conceptualized as a persistent presence within the auditory or cognitive space. Rather than framing tinnitus as an external force or mechanical

failure, the writer characterizes it as an internal cohabitant, subtly evoking the image of an entity that has *arrived, settled*, and is *here to stay*. This frame is in line with Guliashvili, (2023) findings on inhabitants metaphors that becomes more prevalent than war metaphors in news discourse about Covid-19, signifying how people have made peace with the virus. In this case, the prevalence of inhabitant metaphor indicates that patients adopt a less harsh attitude towards tinnitus. This might be related to the nature of tinnitus as a medical condition that is not deadly but ever prevailing.

Further, other instances of inhabitant metaphor in tinnitus show that tinnitus is not just an inhabitant, but an uninvited, and annoying one.

#### Data 2

“tinnitus became invasive, annoying, distracting...”

#### Data 3

“but you don’t mind because you know by tomorrow it will be *gone*”

In this way, the unwanted inhabitant metaphor not only conveys the persistence of tinnitus but also enables narrators to position it as something external and unwanted, thereby shaping how they communicate their relationship with the condition in discourse.

#### b. Loss and robbery metaphors

The personal narratives analyzed in this study also revealed the use of Loss and Robbery metaphors, which frame tinnitus as a force that takes something valuable away from the sufferer, often without consent. These metaphors construct the experience of tinnitus not just as an intrusion, but as a theft of identity, ability, or normalcy.

#### Data 4

“It can *rob* someone of silence...”

The inability to control the noise in the ear is depicted through the use of robbery metaphors. Silence in (4) is framed as possession of a person that is being taken away by force by tinnitus. Meanwhile, the patient is the victims. This metaphorical expression activates a frame where the individual’s auditory peace (silence) is part of their rightful personal space, and tinnitus becomes a disruptive force that forcibly removes it (the robber).

#### c. War metaphors

In the data, the metaphorical framing of tinnitus as a war or battle reflects a common and culturally pervasive schema for understanding chronic illness.

#### Data 5

Due to my *battle* with tinnitus, I now have a passion for helping others

Data (5) activates the war frame, which includes key elements such as a fighter (the person with tinnitus), an enemy (tinnitus), a struggle or confrontation (coping, enduring, or resisting symptoms), and an eventual outcome (victory, loss, or transformation). This metaphor frames the entire experience of tinnitus as a combat that require strength and courage. This instance of war metaphor is a part of Conceptual Metaphor of ILLNESS IS WAR (Kövecses, 2010; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Consequently, the emergence of war metaphor in personal narrative of tinnitus patient experience echoes with previous research on illness metaphor that claims patients often take the role of soldier or warrior, reflecting their determination to overcome the illness (Castaño, 2020; Guliashvili, 2023).

#### d. Journey metaphors

Several instances in the personal narrative of tinnitus patients reflect the conceptualization of life as a *journey* and tinnitus as an *obstacle* on that path.

#### Data 6

Although my life continues to be *hindered* in substantial ways by tinnitus

Data (6) activates the Journey frame which includes elements such as such as a traveller (the person with tinnitus), a path (life course), a destination (life goals), and obstacles (tinnitus).

### Data 7

It can *alter* the course of your life

Similarly, data (7) also activates Journey frame which includes the same elements as in data (6) aside from tinnitus that occupies the element of disruptive force on the pathway, invoking the image of a path being redirected due to external interference.

The metaphor helps to structure the subjective experience of illness as a dynamic process that affects one's life direction and goals, rather than as a static condition. The framing of tinnitus as a journey disruption aligns with the broader function of metaphor in health narratives in making sense of complex and often invisible experiences (Semino et al., 2018).

#### e. Living Creature Metaphor

Several instances in the personal narrative of tinnitus patients reflect the conceptualization of Tinnitus as living creature.

### Data 8

It *slithered* into my ears

The metaphorically used expressions "slither" evokes the image of a snake or other stealthy, possibly threatening creature. Within the MIPVU framework, this is an instance of an Indirect Metaphor, as the word "slither" has a basic, physical motion meaning that contrasts with the more abstract target concept of tinnitus onset. This metaphor does not merely describe the emergence of tinnitus; rather, it frames tinnitus as an autonomous and animate agent, that is a creature that intrudes uninvited into the sensory space of the patient. This fits into a broader Living Creature metaphor frame, where tinnitus is not personified as a human (as in personification metaphors), but rather a non-human entity with agency and stealth.

## 3.2. Metaphors for Emotions

Emotions are expressed metaphorically in the personal narrative of tinnitus patients. Many instances show metaphorically expressed negative emotions.

### Data 9

I entered a period of purposelessness, anxiousness, and hopelessness

Example (9) reflects an emotion metaphor, where emotion states are framed as physical locations one can enter. This is in line with the conceptual metaphor EMOTIONAL STATES ARE CONTAINERS or more specifically NEGATIVE EMOTIONS ARE PLACES (Kövecses, 2010). The metaphor frames these emotions as spatial and encompassing, highlighting the sense of entrapment and immersion that tinnitus sufferers may feel during psychological distress. It frames the emotional impact of tinnitus that is often isolating.

## 3.3 Discussion

These metaphors frame tinnitus not only as a medical condition but as an emotional intruder, often perceived as an enemy, thief, or physical force. As Semino et al., (2018) argue in their study of metaphor in illness narratives, such metaphors help individuals make sense of their condition and communicate otherwise intangible experiences, such as persistent emotional pain or despair.

Metaphor analysis of the tinnitus personal narratives using the MIPVU procedure revealed a rich network of emotion metaphors grounded in embodied, spatial, and social experience. Several expressions conceptualized emotional states through direct and indirect metaphors such as "a deep sense of loss seized me," "the full weight of that realization struck me mercilessly," and "I was a mess." These expressions frame feelings as tangible forces, physical burdens, or disruptions, making private emotional states communicable to others. They may also reflect conceptual metaphors like EMOTIONS ARE PHYSICAL FORCES, NEGATIVE STATES ARE ENCLOSURES, and DISTRESS IS DISORDER, consistent with the findings in previous research. For example, emotional suffering is framed as something that occupies space or overwhelms the body, such as in "fear made me feel like I was sinking underwater" or "a cold rush of terror came over me." These metaphorical mappings demonstrate how patients interpret their psychological experience of tinnitus not simply as auditory disturbance, but as a condition that invades, weighs down, and destabilizes their emotional world.

A particularly compelling and novel finding is the recurrent conceptualization of tinnitus as a stubborn intruder, analyzed through what we term the inhabitant metaphor frame. In one striking instance, a narrator writes, “*Has this whisper always been here? That whisper hadn’t always been there. That whisper would never leave.*” Here, tinnitus is metaphorically construed as an unwanted presence inhabiting the narrator’s perceptual space—a persistent, parasitic entity that has settled into their auditory landscape. The use of “whisper” both downplays and dramatizes the presence of tinnitus, characterizing it as subtle yet omnipresent and unremovable. This aligns with Semino et al.’s (2018) observation that patients often attribute intentionality and persistence to chronic illness experiences, especially in the absence of clear medical resolution.

Beyond the intruder metaphor, tinnitus is also metaphorically cast as a living, autonomous creature capable of movement and predation. Notably, expressions such as “it slithered into my ears” and “it preyed upon something that I was already dealing with in my life: anxiety” suggest that tinnitus is experienced not merely as a symptom, but as a malevolent being. Importantly, these are not personifications in the traditional rhetorical sense, but conceptual metaphors that map tinnitus onto animal-like agency—activating schemas of invasion, attack, and parasitism. The implication is that tinnitus is not simply heard but felt as an embodied threat, one that violates boundaries and targets emotional vulnerability.

These metaphorical framings function not only as expressive devices but also serve cognitive and communicative purposes. As Semino et al. (2018) argue, illness metaphors help individuals construct meaningful narratives about their experiences and navigate uncertainty. The metaphors identified here—especially the persistent intruder and living creature metaphors—also indicate a high degree of ontological salience given to tinnitus. It is not just a condition, but a quasi-agent that occupies mental and emotional space, often dominating the patient’s sense of agency, temporality, and identity. These metaphors thus play a central role in how patients cope with and make sense of their tinnitus over time.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study has qualitatively examined metaphorical expressions in personal narratives of individuals living with tinnitus using the MIP procedure and the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory. The analysis identified several dominant metaphor frames, including *emotion* metaphors, *battle* metaphors, *loss and robbery* metaphors, and the notably nuanced *inhabitant* and *living creature* metaphors. These metaphorical framings do more than describe symptoms; they reflect how individuals conceptualize and cope with the chronic, uncertain, and often isolating nature of tinnitus. Particularly, metaphors such as “that whisper would never leave” and “it slithered into my ears” underscore how tinnitus is often perceived as an intrusive, persistent, and agentive presence that affects not only the auditory system but also emotional well-being, personal identity, and life trajectory.

However, it is important to acknowledge that this study is based on a limited dataset of personal narratives. This is why the identified metaphor types and conceptual frames may not capture the full diversity of metaphorical expressions used by all individuals with tinnitus. Larger and more varied datasets, ideally including spoken discourse and narratives from more culturally diverse sources, are needed to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how tinnitus is metaphorically framed across populations.

Nonetheless, this preliminary analysis demonstrates the value of metaphor identification in enriching our understanding of subjective illness experiences. It also suggests that metaphor, offers both patients and practitioners a way to communicate, process, and possibly reframe the burdens of chronic conditions such as tinnitus. Future research should explore how metaphorical framing of tinnitus might inform healthcare professional the design of psychosocial interventions for tinnitus sufferers more accurately

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